

Governability

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Governability

What is the outlook for “illiberal democracies” in East Asia – nominally democratic, but with authoritarian roots and tendencies? Has privatization and the broad retreat of the state from many public good choices made governments more stable? More accountable? More efficient? Or less so across the board?

Compared with some of the other “drivers” identified as an underlying force, which is likely to lead to systemic change in Asia, governability is a variable much more heavily dependent upon other factors both indigenous and exogenous. In that sense, it may even be conceived of more as an end result rather than a driver. For the purpose of opening the discussion, this short essay will try to point out certain key issues, which will have to be addressed before any plausible scenario can be worked out.

Until the financial crisis of 1997 broke out, Southeast Asia was regarded as a success story. Terrorism in countries such as the Philippines showed signs of abating and transitions to democracy were proceeding steadily though not without setbacks. Thailand, Cambodia, and Indonesia have now joined the states which regularly hold parliamentary or legislative elections - the Philippines, Malaysia, and Singapore. The new state of East Timor is following them. The remaining four members of ASEAN, Brunei, Laos, Burma, and Vietnam, still remain outside of politically open societies but serious concerns over governability seem to be diminishing. The elections held or to be held throughout Asia this year indicate that electoral votes will increasingly overpower the backroom politics even in countries with very short democratic history. In the formal sense of the terms defined as a “political system in which people regularly vote to elect their leaders,” democracy as a form of government is likely to stay and continue to be consolidated through revisions of electoral laws and increasingly active input made by NGOs.

The concern which increasingly moves to the foreground even in the mainstream Western political science debate since the financial crisis and after the terrorist act of September 11 seems other than that of chances for liberal democracy. The unfolding of events since that fateful day has brought the recognition that political theories and analyses which had dominated the academic discourse has side-stepped many of the vital issues of real life. How great is the correlation between democratized form of government and governability in the late-developing countries? Studies show that correlation between regime support and political stability on the one hand and the degree of democratization on the other is not always direct. In the third wave

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democracies, the category into which most Asian democracies fall, universal suffrage and free elections came before the vestige of feudalism and colonial government was fully wiped out, the rule of law was established, and economic base was secure enough to make the exercise of individual voting rights truly meaningful.

Asia as a whole or even Southeast Asia represents such a wide diversity of cultural and political heritage and economic situation that it goes far beyond the scope of this short paper designed as a discussion leader to address the issue of governability fairly. Singapore may not be the freest country in the region yet in terms of governability and the quality of living as an indicator of continued regime support, it ranks above others. Its laws might be harsh but the firmly established rule of law makes it possible to achieve great economic success and social stability. In a different case, South Korea, which has garnered great successes in democratizing its political system as well as developing the economy, is experiencing a period of fresh political turmoil and a constitutional crisis of sorts because a democratically elected President was impeached by a democratically elected National Assembly and the disgruntled masses took to the streets again.

It is assumed that democracy is conducive to economic prosperity from the experience of the first world. But in most countries of Asia with a weak tradition of self-government, an arbitrary but strong government was often instrumental in laying the foundation of economic take-off. It remains to be seen how the governments, more democratically elected but weaker in power of mobilization, will fare in carrying out the vital mission of safeguarding national security and feeding the people. North Korea sets a doubly negative example. An undemocratic and arbitrary rule by a Communist dynasty has led to economic stagnation and near bankruptcy. Yet it has remained, beyond all expectations, amazingly stable and resilient, most probably thanks to its heavy reliance on the military.

Success or failure of democracy in Asia will depend to a large extent on the ability of the democratically elected governments to generate enough economic resources to meet the needs of the voting public and remain free from corruption. The ability to cope with the problem of shadow economy and organized crime is a closely related issue. So long as the economy was growing and the emerging middle class was able to dominate the political system becoming increasingly democratic and open, the prospect looked good. But after the financial crisis of 1997, followed by an economic down turn, most countries in Asia experienced sharper

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bifurcation within the national bourgeoisie, a situation, which does not bode well in terms of further development of democracy.

Some outside observers argue that fighting crime and establishing the rule of law would be a task more easily to be handled than that of developing the economy since that latter is more organically related to the tide of globalization and does not allow for much scope for independent action within a national sovereign entity. Corruption and crime at the lower levels might fall into that manageable category. But much of the more serious cases of corruption, perceived as gross injustice by both voters and those who choose to stay outside of the political system altogether, thereby seriously undermining the governability, is linked to the larger process of globalization. Faced with forces of globalization, the choice left for the national leaders, even if democratically elected, is only that of choosing the least evil of the bad alternatives being offered. Thus any discussion on the stability of regimes and the future of democracy in Asia has to address the issue of globalization and its economic and social impact on this part of the world as a whole and on particular countries involved individually.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Marxian analyses and the dependency theory seem to lose much of their influence. But in the aftermath of the economic crisis of 1997 and the spread of terrorism throughout the world, they seem to attract fresh attention. In working out a possible scenario for the future development of Asia, one ignores at one's peril the unexhausted appeal such theories still hold to the nationalistically minded intellectual communities in Asia. The memories of colonial past and fear of a new upsurge of imperial domination are forces much more deeply imbedded in the psyche of the people than is often suspected. Critique of neo-liberalism is as fashionable as criticism of capitalism was in the earlier decades in the formerly colonized countries. Once a viewpoint gains a foothold in the intellectual community with proclivities for political activism, its mass dissemination is much faster than before thanks to the ICT revolution which is also coming to Asia.

On the surface, the Third World movement launched at Bandung seems to have been abandoned in favor developmentalism and movement for democracy. But the anti-colonial obsession and solidarity which had motivated the move has not died out. As globalization proceeds at an accelerated pace with its pressure for further privatization and weakening of the state's capacity directly to control the economic process and thereby meet the demands of all those who feel threatened by it, governments, even when democratically elected, get caught in

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impossible positions. Not only those who had always lived on the economic margin but also those who had enjoyed privileges, including the military, internal security forces, industrial complexes, feel threatened by globalization.

To obviate the charge or suspicion of collusion with international capital, such governments may increasingly appeal to traditional communal values such as nationalism or religion and use critique of international capitalism and “Western” institutions in order to mobilize and maintain popular support. But such compromises will not assuage the extremist critics of globalization and world capitalist order who would insist upon seeing the government itself essentially as agents of the international capitalist order managed by the United States and other advanced countries. In a modified version of the Marxian call, “the Proletariat of the World, Unite”, such dissident groups call for international solidarity of the disadvantaged and oppressed, even downgrading the notion of national sovereignty. The movement for Islamic solidarity or world justice movement are examples which probably will become increasingly prevalent. While various civic groups take full advantage of the legal protection resulting from democratization of the national political system, they accord little regard to the rule of law or democratic form of government. In particular, the Islamic notion of government is quite different from the western notion of governance in which sovereign state remains the central axis. The fact that both the Indonesian and Thai governments were surprised to discover that there were terrorist cells in their countries only indicate the limits of democratic governance in newly emerging democracies. In such countries, for some time to come, traditional forms of social relations will persist while free elections are predicated on the assumption that individual citizens are fully autonomous and mature human beings capable of taking responsibilities for the choices they make.

In discussing the issue of governability in Asia, another important point to consider is the possibility of mass mobilization and manipulation by small determined circles of interest. With the advent of globalization, various stages of historical development, which took the advanced Western countries decades if not centuries to live through, are juxtaposed together. As familiar frames of reference are destroyed with no ready replacement, possibilities of gross misinterpretation of world-wide phenomena on sight and manipulation of public opinion by the public media and the internet are open to an extent undreamt of in the first world countries.

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Demagoguery find ready soil for reception when the enormous disparity in living standard and life style is displayed in vivid images abetting envy and anger.

Throughout Asia, the standard of living has risen perceptively and democratic transition means greater guarantee for human rights in general. But the sense of relative privation can easily increase rather than decrease since the benefits of rapid economic development fall unevenly both across the world spectrum and within each nation, and the disparity is readily recognizable. Especially when the influence of world financial capital becomes increasingly decisive and the competition for limited resources becomes even more intensified, even those countries in Asia which have already embarked upon the democratic path for development might find it imperative to retreat from it.

In the face of the common challenge facing Asia as a whole, some countries, like China and Japan, and possibly Singapore, will emerge as winners, or “predator” states, capable of safeguarding their economic security at the expense of others. Many more could fall on the side of “failed” states, the quality of living of whose citizens will be increasingly affected by decisions made by forces other than their democratically elected governments. In such cases, both democracy and statehood itself increasingly will be rendered meaningless. Some of these might in the end become problem states, sources of international crime and terrorism. Islam in Southeast Asia has been a characterized by tolerance and moderation. But the fact that a hard-core militantism has taken root is an indication that not all is well with democracy in Southeast Asia. Democratic development might make it an even more receptive soil for the idea of a pan-Islamic state capable of shielding itself off from the effect of globalization driven by international financial capital to take root.

The development of China is a great salutary influence for the moment in terms of security and governability in Asia. But the longer effect of the emergence of an Asian economic giant and, in particular, its impact on China’s immediate neighbors, can be unsettling as increasingly fierce competition for limited vital resources will result in straining of domestic as well as international relations. Governing a richer country is no less difficult than leading a poor country is demonstrated by the case of South Korea. Slowing down of economic growth will clearly have adverse impact on the development of political systems.

One of the wild cards clearly lies with North Korea. Most Western experts on North Korea have been unanimous in saying that the country as an economic entity is beyond repair.

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Yet its has used its weakness as an effective weapon in mobilizing South Korea's public opinion on its side, greatly undermining South Korea's own governability. The outcome of the two Koreas issue might not be of immediate concern to the countries in Southeast Asia but the opinion concerning North Korea's nuclear threat and other problems that country represents might be a useful gauge for the deeper lying political sentiments in the region and thus an indicator for the future of democracy in the region.